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Book Review: The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Modern Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600

Benjamin Roberts

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[What is This?](#)

Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Modern Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998, pp. viii + 319. **\$U.S. PRICE? (hard-cover or paperback).**

If the history of childhood was a painting then it would probably belong to the impressionistic school. Many historians have painted its landscape in broad strokes of time including every social strata, drawing upon every topic under the sun, and not silhouetting geographical borders. This image leaves much to desire. In *The Renaissance Man and his Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600*, Louis Haas of Duquesne University adds more definition to this sketchy past by confining the contours of his portrait to the merchant and ruling elite of Renaissance Florence in the period 1300-1600 and restricting his subject matter to childbirth and infancy. By drawing from *ricordi* and *ricordanze*, remembrances and memories, as a source, Haas's picture illustrates more realistic practices and attitudes of Florence's Renaissance fathers. In these personal documents, fathers are prominent writers; women plainly wrote fewer letters than men did. Another asset to studying Florence that was influenced by the humanistic movement was its wealth of moralists, clergymen, educators, and physicians who theorized about childbirth and infancy. The reasons for examining the event of birth is because it is a biological event. It is a point of tension in a human's life in which the religious, political, ritual, and dynastic attitudes of a culture suddenly become translucent. Haas not only examines how Florentines were born but also how Florentines thought about children and birth rituals, how they cared for their young, how they were educated, how they rewarded and punished, how children played, and in some cases, how they mourned the death of a young child.

Historians of Renaissance childhood, such as David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, and Charles de la Roncière, have presented an ugly image of childhood for this period. Their conclusions, based on infant mortality rates, wet-nursing practices, and founding hospital records, support Ariès's gloomy interpretation of childhood. This genre of negative sources will provide historians with a negative image, just as newspapers today might provide future family historians studying the late twentieth century. Love and affection will not be the conclusions but rather child abuse, sexual misuse, and discarded dead infants found in trash bins. The personal documents that Haas studied for Renaissance Florence nuanced this dismal portrait. By studying *ricordi* and *ricordanze*, Haas is able to retrieve the underlying motive for these child-rearing practices, which makes the past a less foreign place for us.

Haas not only observes childhood from a parental perspective but allows us to see Florentine society from a religious and cultural viewpoint. Baptism was one of those rituals that symbolized the acceptance of children into Florentine society, and it exemplified parental love. For the baptism, an infant was paraded in procession, surrounded by his or her entire family, to Florence's baptistery, San Giovanni. Baptism gave children a soul; hence, it was important that children be baptized as soon as possible because if an infant were to die without being baptized, parents feared that the baby was doomed to "Limbo of Children, a place separate from Heaven with no future." To save children from this destiny, parents had their infants baptized quickly (usually within three days of their birth). This often meant that the infant's mother was not present at the baptismal ceremony because she was recovering from childbirth. Florentines often gave their children a name of a living relative or of an ancestor. This practice did not show a lack of originality and did not symbolize the absence of individuality in premodern times. It was a way of binding generations together, connecting the past to the present, amplifying continuity in the family.

Besides family names, the names of saints were a popular choice that Florentines considered to give their children divine protection.

Another image Haas allows us to see from a different perspective is wet-nursing. The practice of having infants nursed by woman other than their mothers has represented neglect to many historians and, in some cases, has been seen as a form of infanticide. Renaissance moral treatises condemned wet-nursing in favor of maternal breast-feeding, but in practice, Florentine urbanites overwhelmingly preferred wet-nursing. In fact, it was so commonplace that the Tuscany countryside was considered to be one big milk farm. One of the main reasons that Haas endorses for the high frequency of wet-nursing was that Florentines were aware of the contraceptive value of maternal breastfeeding. These urban families simply wanted to have more children. The health of the mother, especially after a difficult childbirth, was also a valid reason for employing a wet nurse. Parents could choose between hiring a wet nurse at home, *in casa*, or having an outside wet nurse. Having a wet nurse *in casa* was more expensive because she gave up more freedoms and was under the constant supervision of the family. When hiring a wet nurse, parents were only concerned with the health of their child. One treatise writer, Francesco da Barberino (1264-1348), described the ideal wet nurse to be

between twenty-five and thirty-five years old, as much like the mother as possible, and . . . good color and a strong neck and strong chest and ample flesh, firm and father [AUTHOR: FATTER?] rather than lean, but by no means too much so, her breath not bad, her teeth clean. And as for her manners, guard against the proud and wrathful and gloomy, neither fearful nor foolish, nor coarse. . . . Let her breasts be between soft and hard, big but not excessive in length, the quantity of her milk moderate, and the color white and not green, nor yellow and even less black, the odor good and also the taste, not salty nor bitter, but on the sweet side. (p. 104)

According to another, large-breasted wet nurses were not considered suitable because they could give the child a flat nose.

While these child-rearing practices and attitudes are being unfolded, a question slowly dawns on the reader: What is so Renaissance about the Renaissance Man? Nothing. If anything, the premodern father of the Renaissance was probably more of a father than his modern counterpart.

—Benjamin Roberts
University of Groningen

Tommaso Astarita, *Village Justice: Community, Family, and Popular Culture in Early Modern Italy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. xxiv + 305. **\$U.S. PRICE? (hardcover or paperback).**

In *Village Justice: Community, Family, and Popular Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Tommaso Astarita studies Pentidattilo, a small, isolated, and fundamentally poor village in southern Calabria. During the early modern period, Pentidattilo numbered fewer than 700 people, its economy was rural, and its social structure "was simple." The events at Pentidattilo and the actions of its people were by and large unexceptional; they did not make a dramatic and direct impact on the larger political reality of the Kingdom of Naples. Astarita has focused on a region deemed backward by both Italian and European scholarship, on a village whose history was irrelevant to larger historical questions. Yet, in reconstructing the social and cultural history of this village and its transformation during the eighteenth century, Astarita gives Pentidattilo a vital voice that contributes to our understanding of rural communities. The starting point of